

4 conflict snapshots and a call 2 arms

By Jayaprakash Satyamurthy

One.

The nudes of 1937

In crisp black & white

In Lilliput or some other

Daring but respectable little magazine

Light and shade carefully arrayed

Approaching the condition of art

Slim girls or curvy ones

Bodies that then saw the phoney war

The home front. Blitz.

Did they become land girls, factory girls

Nurses, wrens, WAAFs, wives?

Showgirls, fishwives, dollymops...

None of them are with us now.

Or so few as not to be worth counting.

The nudes of 1937, flesh

Innocent of colour

In a pre-Kodachrome, prelapsarian

Oasis

Between convulsions

The nudes of 1937. Shiny pages between short stories
And essays, cartoons of politicians long forgotten,
Ads for Brylcreem and Bovril

The nudes of 1937. Terribly daring
Or desperate. Or hopeful. Or doing it
For a lark.
Never knowing so many leaders were waiting
To ambush their lives
From Adolf to Maggie to

The nudes of 1937. Old hat when
Mods and rockers invented sex
Old bags when Tony Blair invented lying
Old bats doddering and drooling when the
New millennium marched in
Stinking of fate and ruins

Land girls, factory girls
Nurses, wrens, WAAFs, wives
Showgirls, fishwives, dollymops...

The nudes of 1937.

Two.

Curfew, Curfew
Deity with an iron fist

Cancelling school
Keeping me home
Reading books like I was
Starving for stories

Small me. Big words
Like 'riots'
'Communal violence'
'Curfew'
Small me drinking orange soda
Hiding behind the curtains
With a book

We left the city in '89
In '90 it burned again
That city where I'd only known
Hospitality from
Muslims or Hindus or Christians
Too small to know
Why Mother Curfew
Hovered in the sky
Blotting sun
Her strong arms crossed
Diaphanous wings
Fluttering almost faster than sight

'92 the bhakts
Smashed the old mosque

In the city where they say

Lord Ram was born

Newspapers like horror paperbacks

Or world war history books

In father's bookshelves

Big words. Bad times.

Time to retire the old phrases

'Unity in diversity' 'all Indians are my brothers and sisters'

The 90s in garden city

Tamizh and Kannadiga fighting

Over a river

Great Goddess Curfew returned

Closing college, keeping me indoors

In the rubble left behind

By parents' divorce

I was

Pulling shrapnel from

My bones

While everything crouched

Sheltering from the beating

Of her heart, her wings

O Curfew

Truest deity of my times

In this year of our plague

I beseech you

Keep us safe

Keep us whole

Be the people's goddess

Teach us not to need you

Not to need you even though

I now know if Bharat Mata

Ever had an aspect

For these times

It is you.

Three.

I am sorry the government banned tiktok

Sorry the government blacked out the internet

Sorry you don't speak that much english

And aren't blonde anyway even if some of you

Are light-eyed and light-skinned, for south asians

Sorry none of the sexy wars involved you

Just a seventy-year-old sibling rivalry

In a boring subcontinent

Sorry you're our Ireland

Sorry you're a Led Zeppelin song that has nothing to do with you

(Even though it's got one of the good riffs Page actually wrote)

Sorry you were never known well enough

To be forgotten.

Four.

What haven't we seen now?

Cold wars starting to thaw

Walls falling to

Make the better world

With open hearts and open

Markets

Should have paid more heed

To the tanks

Should have paid more heed

To the oil

To the true believers, to god,

Money, liberty, to all the

Jealous religions

Now our surviving generations

Stand here at the long funeral

Where the twentieth century at last

Lowers the nineteenth into the grave

And is itself being laid out

In the long-awaited casket

We look at each other

The orphans and relicts at this

Moebius funeral

Wondering who has it worse

The old, who lived to see

The young, who never saw

Or we, in between,

Whose only job was to work

In the downfall?

Should have paid more heed

To the sound of thunder

Should have paid more heed

To the formula for absolution

The sod hits the wooden box

A gravedigger's job is secure

We shuffle away to the foyer

Drink the bad red wine

Size up the floral tributes

What haven't we seen now?

What haven't we seen now?

Five: To Arms

Feed another poem into the chamber

Another bullet into the booklet

This is the weapon with which I'm able.

Load another verse in the can(n)on

Light a fuse and publish it
This is the war as I can fight it
The fuse as I can light it.

Poets aren't bulletproof
And death is in love with all that live
But in love it may let slip
A verse or two
A word and some ellipses...

...Valhalla is only paper
Eternity is only ink or pixel
But in such dreams I load and reload
And keep my phrases dry
And trust in my words.